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SUBJECT: Jose Mujica Wins Uruguayan Presidency

¶1. (U) Summary. As predicted by all major polling companies, Frente Amplio candidate and former Tupamaro guerrilla Jose "Pepe" Mujica will be the next President of Uruguay, after winning 53 percent of the vote in a runoff election against Luis Alberto Lacalle November 29. Both Mujica and Lacalle lauded Uruguay's long democratic tradition, and called for all sides to work together for the country's benefit. Mujica promised to continue and build on the economic and social policies of incumbent President Vazquez. He hopes to name his cabinet by December 20, giving time for a smooth tradition before the March 1 inauguration. End Summary.

Mujica's Victory Historic, and Expected

¶2. (U) Frente Amplio candidate Jose Mujica won the November 29 Presidential runoff election against National Party candidate and former President Luis Lacalle with a projected total of 53 percent of the vote. Lacalle received 43 percent, and 4 percent of voters submitted blank or annulled ballots.

¶3. (U) Mujica's win was widely expected after he claimed 48 percent of the vote in first-round elections (to Lacalle's 29 percent) October 25. Almost all polls projected Mujica as steadily holding a 10 point margin over Lacalle in the past month. Colorado Party candidate Pedro Bordaberry threw his support to Lacalle after finishing in third place in October, but their combined efforts proved insufficient to overcome Mujica's significant lead.

¶4. (U) As in the first round, Mujica's support was greatest in Montevideo (where he received almost 60 percent of the vote) and the neighboring vote-rich Department of Canelones (where he finished with 56 percent). Mujica also defeated Lacalle in the departments of Salto, Paysandu, and Soriano, but by slimmer margins. Lacalle won all other departments, but the FA ticket actually received more votes in the interior of the country than in the first round of elections on October 25.

¶5. (U) Flooding in the northwest of the country threatened to block access to voting stations, but Uruguayan authorities did a good job of clearing up these logistical difficulties by election day, moving a few polling stations and providing transportation to others. Despite some delays in the counting of votes due to blackouts in Soriano and Rivera departments, the flooding had little impact on the outcome.

Both Mujica and Lacalle Conciliatory in Victory and Defeat

16. (U) Following the projection of Mujica's victory by all major national pollsters, Lacalle received a call from President Vazquez, who, having lost in a similar fashion in the 1999 presidential race, expressed empathy for the candidate. Lacalle then called Mujica to concede, and addressed his constituents at the headquarters of his National Party faction, Unidad Nacional. In his concession speech to a tearful crowd, Lacalle thanked his supporters, celebrated the country's long democratic tradition, and called on all sides to work together to find solutions for the problems shared by all Uruguayans.

17. (U) Mujica and running mate Danilo Astori, accompanied by a jubilant President Vazquez, proclaimed victory at around 9:30 pm in front of a massive crowd at the NH Columbia hotel along the River Plate, where thousands of Frente Amplio supporters clogged the streets for miles. Mujica's speech was humble and conciliatory. He pledged to work for the benefit of all Uruguayans and reminded his followers of the importance of working with their compatriots in the National Party in the months and years ahead. Mujica

acknowledged that he had won largely because of the success of Vazquez's policies and pledged to continue and expand upon them. A planned concert and fireworks were interrupted by the onset of heavy storms, but thousands of rain-drenched Frente Amplio supporters remained on the streets celebrating the victory.

Cabinet Starting to Take Shape?

18. (U) According to press reports, Mujica plans to name his cabinet on December 20. He currently hopes to designate ministries in accordance with each Frente Amplio faction's representation within Parliament, with roughly five ministries (including Defense, Foreign Affairs, and Interior) going to members of Mujica's Movement for Popular Participation (MPP), four to running mate Danilo Astori's Frente Liber Seregni (including the economic ministries), two to the Socialist Party, one to the Vertiente Artiguista Party, and one to the Communist Party. This could well change if the National or Colorado parties agree to form part of a coalition government. Mujica will be meeting with Colorado Party leader Pedro Bordaberry November 30 and Lacalle December 4 to discuss this possibility.

19. (SBU) While the government is expected to shift leftwards following Mujica's inauguration in March 2010, the new president is expected to continue many of the policies supported by his predecessor Tabare Vazquez, particularly in economic policy and social policy. Mujica pledged to address security, education, and health, areas in which the Vazquez government has faced challenges.

Implications for Uruguayan Foreign Policy

¶10. (SBU) Mujica has limited experience in foreign affairs and there was almost no discussion of foreign policy during the elections. He clearly was the favored candidate of South American leaders of countries such as Venezuela and Argentina, and some of his followers may encourage collaboration with ALBA. At the same time, Mujica has sought to demonstrate that he understands the importance of the bilateral relationship with the United States, even visiting the U.S. Embassy (for the first time) in September. Mujica has also emphasized his admiration for Lula. Mujica's key appointments, especially for Foreign and Defense Ministers, will offer the most solid early clues about Mujica's foreign policy direction.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) Mujica's historic trajectory -- from a Tupamaro guerrilla who spent over a decade in prison during the military dictatorship to leadership of the country -- was unthinkable only two years ago. His victory demonstrates that the leftist Frente Amplio (FA) coalition's strength transcends current President Tabare Vazquez's own considerable personal popularity. We expect some jostling over Cabinet positions, and perhaps a period of confusion as the new team takes office and begins to become familiar with international and regional issues. While Mujica is open to working with the U.S. and we have strong relationships with key Frente Amplio politicians who are expected to be included in a Mujica administration, it will likely take some time to reach the high level of cooperation that we currently enjoy on regional and multinational issues. End comment.

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